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Stem cells

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PRESIDENTIAL BIOETHICS ADVISORS MAY WELL COME DOWN ON THE SIDE OF FEDERAL FUNDING FOR RESEARCH ON STEM CELLS DERIVED FROM EMBRYOS

The National Bioethics Advisory Commission (NBAC) is leaning toward a policy position that would allow federal funding for experiments that involve either extracting or using stem cells from fetal tissue and from donated "excess" embryos originally created for infertility treatment, according to discussions at a commission meeting Tuesday in Virginia.

Such a decision would require a change in a federal law that forbids federal funding for experiments with human embryos regardless of their source. That law is set to expire at the end of the current fiscal year, but proponents of the measure are expected to push for its renewal. However, recent discoveries about the potential curative powers of stem cells has, in the eyes of many--including members of the NBAC--changed the moral landscape of embryo research and provided strong ethical reasons for a substantial change in the law.

Signs that a policy position is emerging from NBAC come as the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is being battered by congressional critics for its assertion that it is legal to fund experiments with stem cells derived from embryos, as long as the extraction is done without taxpayer money. (see Washington Fax 1/20/99)

Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala recently dispatched a letter to one of the authors of the embryo research ban defending NIH's legal authority to fund stem cell experiments.

Some commission members, despite their support for stem cell research, also were critical of the NIH decision. And they said one reason to seek a federal policy that allows both the "derivation and use" of stem cells from embryos is because the NIH position, announced in January, rests on a "disingenuous" and legalistic separation of stem cells from their embryonic origins.

"I don't believe use and derivation can be separated and, therefore, I hope the law will be changed to allow (both)," said NBAC member Alex Capron, who is co-director of the Center for Health Policy and Ethics at the University of Southern California.

President Clinton asked the NBAC late last year to consider the ethics of stem cell research after scientific breakthroughs in isolating them from fetuses and embryos sparked enormous excitement about the potential of stem cells as research tools and as the source of powerful new therapies for a host of conditions. (see Washington Fax 11/25/98)

For example, some scientists believe stem cells, which possess the potential to become almost any cell in the body, could be used to quickly screen drugs for toxicity and efficacy. Others see stem cells as a limitless source of transplantable tissue that could repair damage wrought by such chronic diseases as Parkinson's and diabetes.

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NBAC (Cont'd)

The policy discussed by NBAC Tuesday is one that would allow derivation and use of stem cells, under stringent guidelines, from two sources: fetal tissue, a source that already is legally available to federally funded scientists, and spare embryos leftover from infertility treatments that are then donated to science, a source currently available only to researchers working with private support.

Most commissioners agreed that there is no need (at least not yet) for the government to fund the creation of embryos solely for research purposes, whether it involves in vitro fertilization or the more controversial somatic cell nuclear transfer (which is commonly associated with cloning but could have the potential to provide genetically compatible stem cells).

In general, the policy position under consideration follows a construct presented Tuesday to NBAC by John Fletcher, a professor (emeritus) of Biomedical Ethics at the University of Virginia School of Medicine. Fletcher proposed that the commission focus on the ethical issues involved in using fetal tissue and excess embryos as stem cell resources, arguing that the "scientific background" for reviewing other sources--i.e. embryos created for research or via somatic cell nuclear transfer--is "too meager at this point to inform a thorough review."

He argued that the commission, by recommending that federally funded scientists be allowed to extract stem cells from donated excess embryos, would be offering a public interested in the potential benefits a "morally acceptable" way to take advantage of stem cells. He said that the NIH decision to legally de-couple stem cells from embryos is a "moral provocation" that could end up doing more harm than good by galvanizing the opposition.

"It is not an ethical argument, it is an opinion that use can be separated from derivation, as if derivation is not relevant," Fletcher said. "As a moral construct I think that is very weak and evasive."

NBAC member David Cox, a professor of genetics and pediatrics at Stanford University School of Medicine, noted that NBAC needs to consider public sentiment as opposed to legal interpretations of the embryo research ban. "Whether this is legal or not, people are pretty (angry about the NIH decision), he said, "and if we don't make a statement about it then we're ducking the issue."

NBAC is expected to continue discussing the issue at a meeting scheduled for April 15-16 in Charlottesville, VA. No date has been set for issuing the commission's report to President Clinton on stem cells.
--Matthew Davis

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